

The Builder.

No. CCCCLVI.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1851.

AN organised "strike" on the part of a large body of artisans is so serious a matter,—so fraught with loss and evil,—that we think it necessary to state more fully than we did last week the circumstances which have led to the withdrawal from work of all the men employed by Mr. Myers, the contractor, and the appointment of a committee on their part to obtain an adjustment of the difference. Many of our readers are aware that, in compliance with representations made by the workmen some time ago, the men cease work on Saturdays at four o'clock in most of the large metropolitan establishments, and are paid for that as a full day. The same course was pursued in Mr. Myers's establishment, but he has added a condition which is not made by some other employers. This condition is, that if any man loses more time during the week than a quarter of a day (two hours and a half), he shall not have the advantage of the short time on Saturday. In order, however, to let the workmen tell their own story, we will quote a printed document which they have issued. It is headed—

"Notice on behalf of the General Strike in Mr. Myers's Firm.—Four o'clock Movement."

And is to the following effect:—

"Fellow workmen,—In order that our present position may be fully understood in the building trade, and to make known that our secession from work in Mr. Myers's employ was not determined without the greatest deliberation and judgment, and that our conduct has not been arbitrary or overbearing, we beg to submit a few facts in connection with this affair. We have not struck from work to establish a precedent: all we require is to be treated by our employers as other respectable employers treat their workmen, viz., that we should be allowed the privilege of leaving work at four o'clock on Saturdays, which is an established rule in the building trade."

The notice then goes on to state that their employer had deviated from that rule, and had laid down a regulation, that if the man loses more than a quarter of a day in the course of a week he has to pay the penalty of one hour and a half extra; and on this the committee remark,—

"It is impossible, at this season of the year, to work a week without losing time, and more especially those who reside at any distance from the works. Now we ask," the notice goes on to say, "are we not justified in resisting so unjust an encroachment on our rights and liberties? Place us on the same footing as the men employed by Messrs. Baker, W. and T. Cubitt, Lee, Grissell, and several other principal employers, and we shall be satisfied. We consider such an attempt to wring from our hard earnings such a paltry amount as degrading in the extreme, and we look to our fellow workmen for protection and assistance in this struggle for our rights. There are, in consequence of this strike, upwards of one thousand men out of employment. It is not a struggle of one branch alone, but of all the various branches in the building trade, viz., bricklayers, masons, carpenters, wood and stone carvers, smiths, plumbers, and labourers."

The notice is signed on behalf of the com-

mittee by a "chairman," and "secretary."

In reply to this, Mr. Myers says,—

"As I find some misapprehension exists with regard to the terms I offered to my workmen at the commencement of the present 'strike,' will you allow me to give the following explanation:—

First. All men working fifty-eight hours and a half a week, and leaving at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, are paid a full week's wages.

Second. All men working less than fifty-six hours lose the privilege of the short day on Saturday, and are paid for the exact number of hours they have worked.

The motive for establishing this rule was to induce the men to make full time, as great inconvenience and positive loss to the employer is the result of their not doing so. Take, for instance, the bricklayer, the plumber, or the mason-fixer, each of whom requires one labourer, and occasionally two, to serve him. Should either of these workmen be absent, the labourer's time is rendered unavailable, though still paid for.

If a workman loses time from wet weather or sickness, he does not forfeit the privilege of the short time on Saturday, but is paid for that as a full day.

I find the late strike at the Great Northern was owing to the workmen losing the privilege of the short Saturday, when they were unavoidably stopped by wet weather. This point being conceded, they have returned, and are now contentedly at work, with a privilege of losing two hours per week, while my rule is two-and-a-half hours."

The workmen to this make rejoinder:—

"Mr. Myers states that 'if a workman loses time from wet weather or sickness, he does not forfeit the privilege of the short time on Saturday, but is paid for that as a full day.' This we deny; and positively assert that if any man, or body of men, in Mr. Myers's employ, lose more time than two and a half hours, or one quarter of a day, during the week, no matter from what cause such time is lost, he is denied the advantage of the short time on Saturday; which we hold to be unjust, and also contrary to the practice of the most respectable and largest firms in the building trade. Now, Sir, we put it fairly to the sense of justice in the public mind, should we be acting fairly and honourably to such gentlemen as Messrs. Baker, Grissell, Lee, W. and T. Cubitt, and the other respectable firms in London, were we to receive from them a larger amount of remuneration for our labour than we are willing to accept from other firms?"

In the first instance, Mr. Myers declined replying either one way or the other to their request, on the ground that the matter was under discussion by the other master-builders. Since then he has given the committee an interview, re-asserted that it is not and was not his desire that men should forfeit the privilege through wet weather or sickness, and endeavoured to convince them it was necessary for his own and his employers' interest to induce regularity in attendance on the part of the men. At present, however, this is without effect, and there are now two thousand men idling about. Thirty or forty of them, it appears, have been taken on by other firms; and the rest will have what are called "strike wages." The wages they received from Mr. Myers, we may say, were 5s. a-day the artisans, and 3s. a-day the labourers.

From the above it will be evident that Mr. Myers yields making the deduction when the loss of time is caused by weather or sickness, even admitting, as asserted by the workmen in the letter quoted, and to ourselves personally since, that he had previously insisted on it under those circumstances. The question, therefore, only relates to the denial of the privilege on Saturdays, in the case of those

who absent themselves for their own pleasure during the week, which to us really does not seem unreasonable. In the case of irregularity on the part of individuals, causing inconvenience and loss, the remedy would seem to be in the master's own hands: he would, we suppose, as in other trades and services, discharge them, and look out for men that suited him better; but by offering, as it were, a premium for regular attendance, this extreme proceeding would be rendered less often necessary.

We must be permitted to remind the workmen what their own good sense must have suggested to most of them, that a *diminution in the duration of labour is in truth an increase in the wages paid*. This increase finally resolves itself into an increase in the price of the object produced, and if this be greater than the consumer will pay,—greater than he would have to pay elsewhere,—the employer, to put an extreme case, must soon cease to have occasion for their services, and instead of increased wages there will be none at all. The real value of labour is not settled by strikes. No one can deplore more sincerely than we do the hopeless toil to which thousands are condemned without respite: no one can be more anxious than we are, however inefficiently we may show it, to obtain for the labouring classes a greater proportion of the good things of life than they now enjoy, with less fatigue, a pleasant home, and time for recreation and improvement; but the causes which regulate these things lie deeper than the mere demand of those who want and the will of those who have.

The condition of the building operatives is fortunately much better than that of some other classes. "Look," said a writer in *Fraser's Magazine*, last year, "at the Spitalfields weavers, 'formerly the only botanists in the metropolis,' possessing, within the memory of living man, an Entomological Society, a Horticultural Society, a Historical Society, and a Mathematical Society, all maintained by the operatives,—bringing forth a Dollond, a Simpson, and an Edwards; and then, in the course of this very half-century, seeing their wages cut away from them year after year, falling from 14s. 6d. (average) in 1824 to 7s. in 1839, and to 5s. 6d. in 1849: till the second or third-rate weavers are found living twenty-three persons in a house; tasting sometimes animal food once a month. Look at the 3,000 labourers scuffling every morning at the London Dock gates for a single day's hire of half-a-crown, and if failing of admission, still waiting in the yards by the day long, on the chance of earning 4d. an hour if wanted for some stray ship,—the average earnings of the whole class not exceeding 5s. per week throughout the year; whilst an easterly wind will throw 7,000 out of employ, or, with their dependents, 20,000! Look at the slop-work tailors, the men receiving 3s. 6d. for the coats they made at 5s. 1d. two years ago,—sometimes eating, drinking, sleeping, working in one room, as many as ever the room will contain; the women earning at the best from 4s. 6d. to 5s. per week, let them sit from eight in the morning till ten at night, and paying out of that 1s. 6d. for trimmings and 6d. candles every week, so that altogether they earn about 3s. in the six days,—hopeless creatures, that 'never knew a rise, but continual reductions!'"

The improvement in the condition of the